

METHODS AND APPARATUS FOR STATISTICAL MULTIPLEXING WITH DISTRIBUTED MULTIPLEXERS

This application claims the benefit of U.S. provisional patent application no.
60/425,796 filed on November 13, 2002, which is incorporated herein and made a part hereof
5 by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to statistical multiplexing schemes for digital
cable and satellite television signals. More specifically, the present invention provides
methods and apparatus for statistical multiplexing of a large number of video channels using a
10 distributed, multistage multiplexing architecture. The present invention is particularly
applicable to any dense multiplexing scheme, for example systems that require statistical
multiplexing of approximately 250 video channels.

Digital television offers viewers high quality video entertainment with features such as
pay-per-view, electronic program guides, video-on-demand, weather and stock information,
15 as well as Internet access and related features. Video images, packaged in an information
stream, are transmitted to the user via a broadband communication network over a satellite,
cable, or terrestrial transmission medium. Due to bandwidth and power limitations, efficient
transmission of film and video demands that compression and formatting techniques be
extensively used. Protocols developed by the Motion Pictures Experts Group (MPEG) such
20 as MPEG-1 and MPEG-2 maximize bandwidth utilization for film and video information
transmission by adding a temporal component to a spatial compression algorithm.

Commonly, it is necessary to adjust a bit rate of digital video programs that are
provided, e.g., to subscriber terminals in a cable television network or the like. For example, a
first group of signals may be received at a headend via a satellite transmission. The headend
25 operator may desire to forward selected programs to the subscribers while adding programs
(e.g., commercials or other content) from a local source, such as storage media or a local live
feed. Additionally, it is often necessary to provide the programs within an overall available

channel bandwidth. It may also be desired to change the relative quality level of a program by allocating more or fewer bits during encoding or transcoding.

Accordingly, the statistical multiplexer (statmux), or encoder, which includes a number of encoders for encoding uncompressed digital video signals at a specified bit rate, has been developed. The statistical remultiplexer (statremux), or transcoder, which handles pre-compressed video bit streams by re-compressing them at a specified bit rate, has also been developed. Moreover, functions of a statmux and statremux may be combined when it is desired to transcode pre-compressed data while also coding uncompressed data for transport in a common output bitstream. Uncompressed programs are coded for the first time, while compressed programs are re-encoded, typically at a different bit rate.

These statmux and statremux devices evaluate statistical information of the source video that is being encoded, and allocate bits for coding the different video channels accordingly. For example, video channels that have hard-to-compress video, such as a fast motion scene, can be allocated more bits, while channels with relatively easy to compress scenes, such as scenes with little motion, can be allocated fewer bits. An example of a statistical multiplexing scheme is disclosed in, for example, commonly-owned co-pending patent application no. 09/665,373 filed on September 20, 2000 entitled Method and Apparatus for Determining a Bit Rate Need Parameter In A Statistical Multiplexer, which is incorporated herein and made a part hereof by reference.

As the number of services offered over cable and satellite television systems continue to grow, there has developed a need for improved multiplexing schemes that can accommodate the dense multiplexing required to deliver such a large number of services. It would be advantageous to provide a practical method to statistical multiplex a large number of video channels using a distributed, multistage multiplexing architecture.

The methods and apparatus of the present invention provide the foregoing and other advantages.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides methods and apparatus for statistical multiplexing of a large number of data streams (e.g., video channels) using a distributed, multistage multiplexing architecture. In particular, the present invention provides modular and scalable statistical multiplexing architecture using a two-stage multiplexing scheme. A plurality of encoders are associated with each first stage multiplexer. The bandwidth allocation among all encoders is controlled by a second stage multiplexer, using a bandwidth request process. A bandwidth request message is communicated from each of a plurality of encoders to the second stage multiplexer. The second stage multiplexer allocates available bandwidth between the encoders based on the bandwidth request messages. The second stage multiplexer then communicates an allocated bandwidth message to each of the encoders. The allocated bandwidth message contains an allocated bandwidth for each encoder. Each encoder encodes a data stream in accordance with the allocated bandwidth for that encoder to provide an encoded data stream from each encoder. A plurality of the encoded data streams are multiplexed at each first stage multiplexer to provide a multiplexed data stream at a constant data rate. The second stage multiplexer multiplexes the multiplexed data streams from a plurality of the first stage multiplexers to provide a multiplexed transport stream.

The transport rate output from each first stage multiplexer is constant and may be up to the output transport rate of the second stage multiplexer. Such a constant output transport rate is easier to implement than a variable transport rate. However, the total bandwidth within each first stage multiplex remains variable, and any unused bandwidth may be filled with null packets, which can be dropped to provide bandwidth for additional data (or vice versa). This allows the two-stage multiplexer to be used for a single large stream group that occupies a large output data pipe (e.g., 250 Mbps).

Corresponding methods and apparatus are provided.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will hereinafter be described in conjunction with the appended drawing figures, wherein like numerals denote like elements, and:

Figure 1 shows an example illustration of media hub architecture for use with an
5 example embodiment of the invention;

Figure 2 shows a block diagram of an example embodiment of the invention; and

Figure 3 shows a block diagram of a further example embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The ensuing detailed description provides exemplary embodiments only, and is not intended to limit the scope, applicability, or configuration of the invention. Rather, the ensuing detailed description of the exemplary embodiments will provide those skilled in the art with an enabling description for implementing an embodiment of the invention. It should be understood that various changes may be made in the function and arrangement of elements without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.

The present invention provides methods and apparatus which enable expanded statistical multiplexing capabilities. Figure 1 illustrates an example of proposed media hub architecture that can be used in connection with the present invention. In a prior art design, each first stage multiplexer 12 (designated in the HD (high definition) and SD (standard definition) Groups as MUX) controlled the statistical multiplexing process for the encoders 10 connected to it. Each statistical multiplex processor serviced up to 30 encoders. With the present invention, the statistical multiplex processor is removed from each first stage multiplexer 12 and a single statistical multiplex processor (statmux control processor) is added to the second stage multiplexer 14, as shown in Figure 2. The statmux control processor 20 at the second stage multiplexer 14 controls the statistical multiplexing process across all encoders 10 associated with all first stage multiplexers 12. Overall, the revised architecture of the present invention will provide improved efficiency, greater flexibility, and better video quality.

The architecture of the present invention includes the following features:

1. Statistically multiplexing of all encoded services;
2. Creating and deleting services without impacting other services;
3. Activating or de-activating services without impacting other services; and
4. Changing bandwidth allocation to a service within the range of zero to maximum allowable output bandwidth for the service without impacting other services.

In an example embodiment of the invention as shown in Figure 2, methods and apparatus are provided for statistical multiplexing of a plurality of data streams. A plurality of

first stage multiplexers 12 are provided. A plurality of encoders 10 are operatively associated with each first stage multiplexer 12. A second stage multiplexer 14 is operatively associated with the plurality of first stage multiplexers 12. A statmux control processor 20 is operatively associated with the second stage multiplexer 14.

5 A bandwidth request message 22 may be communicated from each of the encoders 10 to the statmux control processor 20. The statmux control processor 20 may then allocate the available bandwidth based on the bandwidth request messages 22. Once the allocation is complete, the statmux control processor 20 communicates an allocated bandwidth message 24 to each of the encoders 10 that contains an allocated bandwidth for each of the encoders 10
10 based on the allocating. Each of the encoders 10 encodes a data stream in accordance with the allocated bandwidth for that encoder 10, providing an encoded data stream 26 from each encoder 10. Each of the first stage multiplexers 12 multiplexes a plurality of the encoded data streams 26 from the encoders 10 associated therewith, providing a multiplexed data stream 28 at a constant data rate from each of the first stage multiplexers 12. The second stage
15 multiplexer 14 multiplexes a plurality of the multiplexed data streams 28 from the first stage multiplexers 12 to provide a multiplexed transport stream 30.

 The statistical multiplexing processor 20 compares the bandwidth request messages 22 against the available bandwidth (for example, the available bandwidth may be 250 Mbps). Each of the bandwidth request messages 22 may be based on a video complexity level of the
20 content to be encoded. For example, allocation may be made by comparing video complexity levels of all encoded services. The statistical multiplexing processor 20 then sends allocated bandwidth messages 24 to each of the encoders 10 with the allocated bandwidth. The statmux control processor 20 may periodically reallocate the bandwidth based on newly received bandwidth request messages 22. For example, the bandwidth request and allocation process
25 may take place approximately every 1 ms.

 The output bandwidth of each first stage multiplexer 12 is configured to a constant data rate, for example, 80 Mbps. This configuration allows additional data to flow through each first stage multiplexer 12 without adjusting the output bandwidth. For example, during normal operation, less than 35% of the output bandwidth may be used to carry data packets.

The remaining bandwidth may be filled with null packets. If additional data (e.g., television services) is added to that first stage multiplexer 12, then the percentage of data packets increase while the null packets decrease. This allows services to be added or deleted to the first stage multiplexer 12 without impacting other services. In addition, services may be
5 activated or de-activated (i.e., deactivated services are services that are still defined but not in use) without impacting other services. Additionally, bandwidth allocated to the services may be changed without impacting other services. However, the aggregate output bandwidth of the first stage multiplexer 12 remains at the constant rate (e.g., 80 Mbps).

Accordingly, in one example embodiment of the invention, a number of null packets may be provided to the plurality of encoded data streams 26 at one of the first stage multiplexers 12 in the event that a total bandwidth allocated to the encoders 10 associated with that first stage multiplexer 12 is less than the constant data rate. The null packets may then be stripped off from the multiplexed data stream 28 at the second stage multiplexer 14.

An amount of additional data may be provided to one or more of the first stage multiplexers 12. The number of null packets that are added may be reduced corresponding to the amount of additional data.

The data streams may comprise television services. The present invention enables services to be added or deleted at the first stage multiplexers 12. A number of null packets may be added or deleted corresponding to the added or deleted services. In addition, services may be activated or deactivated at the first stage multiplexers 12. A number of null packets may be added or deleted corresponding to the activated or deactivated services.

The bandwidth allocated to the services may be changed at the first stage multiplexers 12 while maintaining the constant data rate.

A total data rate output from the plurality of first stage multiplexers 12, including the
10 null packets, may be greater than the available bandwidth of the second stage multiplexer. The null packets are then stripped off at the second stage multiplexer 14.

In order to build the multiplexed transport stream 30 (for example a 250 Mbps transport stream), the outputs from several first stage multiplexers 12 may be passed through encryptors 16 (see Figure 1) and then to the second stage multiplexer 14. The encryptors 16

encrypt the data streams and forward the encrypted data streams to the second stage multiplexer 14. The second stage multiplexer 14 strips off any null packets that have been added and multiplexes the data packets to form the final multiplexed transport stream 30.

5 In a further example embodiment of the invention, a dedicated control channel 32 may be provided between the encoders 10 and the statmux control processor 20 for communicating the bandwidth request messages 22 and the allocated bandwidth messages 24. As shown in Figure 3, the dedicated control channel 32 may comprise a plurality of subnets 33, 34, and 35 in order to mitigate congestion. The messages travel on their appropriate subnets 33, 34, and 35 between the encoders 10 and the second stage multiplexer 14. The
10 control channel 32 may use, for example, standard 10/100-Base-T Ethernet.

The present invention uses a statmux control processor 20 at the second stage multiplexer 14 to control the statistical multiplexing process. In prior art designs, each first stage multiplexer 12 provided statistical multiplexing controls for up to 30 encoders connected to it. Allocating and sharing of bandwidth was kept within this grouping. The
15 revised architecture of the present invention provides statistical multiplexing for all the encoders 10.

It should now be appreciated that the present invention provides advantageous methods and apparatus for controlling statistical multiplexing of a large number of services.

20 Although the invention has been described in connection with various illustrated embodiments, numerous modifications and adaptations may be made thereto without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as set forth in the claims.